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ABSTRACT

This study measures the impact of sexual equality on the differences between male and female involvement in crime. The units of analysis were all 100 counties in North Carolina. Data for the dependent variable, male-female involvement in crime, were obtained from the North Carolina Police Information Network. The 1970 U.S. Census was the source of data on the control variables which consisted of population density, degree of urbanization, percent unemployed, percent nonwhite, percent of the population female, and female age structure. Analysis of the data indicates that sexual equality does not significantly reduce the male-female gap in criminal behavior. Female labor force participation, urbanization, and income level are more important factors. The counties with the lowest male-female crime differentiation are characterized by high female force participation, low urbanization, and a high income level. (Author/RM)

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Sexual Equality, Female Labor Force Participation and Female Crime: Testing Some Common Assumptions

Cecil L. Willis

ABSTRACT

Most of the contemporary research on female crime rates has focused on the impact of the Women's Liberation movement on reducing the differences between male and female crime. This perspective assumes that increases in female crime are due to women becoming emancipated both culturally and structurally. Other recent studies, however, have suggested that the gap between male and female crime has not been significantly reduced. The concern of both groups of studies is the impact of sexual equality on the differences between male and female involvement in crime. In this study a measure of male-female crime differentation is used to determine if greater sexual equality and more female labor force participation contribute to fewer differences between male and female participation in crime. The results of an analysis of 100 counties in a southeastern state indicate that sexual equality does not significantly reduce the male-female gap in criminal behavior. Female labor force participation, urbanization and income level are more important factors. The counties with the lowest male-female crime differentation are characterized by high female labor force participation, low urbanization and a high income level. Implications regarding the nature of these findings for future research are discussed.

Sexual Equality, Female Labor Force Participation and Female Crime: Testing Some Common Assumptions

In recent years there has been an increase in interest regarding female crime. Much of the interest has been concentrated on assessing the impact of the Women's Liberation Movement on changes in female crime. While these studies have contributed a great deal to our understanding of female crime they have not fully explored the issue. In this study a measure of male-female crime differentiation is used to determine if greater sexual equality and more female labor force participation contribute to fewer differences between male and female involvement in crime.

Literature Review

Empirical and theoretical efforts by social scientists to explain female crime have appeared in the literature since Lombroso (1920). The writings of W. I. Thomas (1923), Freud (1933), Reckless (1967) and Pollak (1959) are the most prominent of the earlier works which directed attention to female criminality. These analyses tended to attribute female crime to unique physiological or psychological traits of women. Female Lawbreakers were depicted as rebellious, manipulative, and deceitful (Klein, 1973).

More recent efforts, however, have approached female criminality quite differently by focusing on the women's rights movement as a factor. One approach assumes that "liberated" women act more like men in both legal and illegal roles. Increases in female criminality are explained by women "breaking out" of their traditional female roles and moving toward traditional male roles. There is some evidence to support this argument.

For instance, the research by Adler (1975; 1977) suggests that greater sexual equality leads to more female crimes. She argued that as social and economic disparities between the sexes decrease the rate of female crime increases. Her conclusion was that increases in female assertiveness led women to break out of traditional limits of female criminality and that the women's movement was a factor in this change. A study by Deming (1977) concluded that the women's liberation movement has "emboldened" women to commit more male crimes. Sutherland and Cressey (1978) observed that female crime is greater in those countries in which there is more equality among the sexes.

However, other evidence suggests that increases in female criminality may not be a function of changing female roles. They conclude that although the female crime rate may be increasing and the male-female gap in criminality is decreasing these changes are traceable neither to changing sex roles nor to changes in females' position in the social structure. Most of the increases in crime occurred in larceny in such areas as shoplifting and fraud -- traditional "female crimes" (Simon, 1976; Steffensmeier, 1978;

1979; Dale Hoffman-Bustamante, 1973). In effect, females are committing more crimes but not necessarily more "male" crimes. Steffensmeier (1980: 1083) also discovered that, "while the relative gap between sexes has narrowed for some crimes, the absolute gap has widened for most crimes."

Although there is considerable disagreement concerning changes in the female crime rate, the central question which runs through all of these studies is: Does more equal participation in society result in more equal participation in crime?

The assumption underlying this question is that the same structural factors influence female crime as influence male crime. Thus the primary reason for sexual differences in crime is that females occupy fewer crime producing positions in society. If both sexes operated in the same structural context (i.e., full similarity of sex roles) then their respective crime rates ought to be the same.[1]

The purpose of this study is to test the proposition that the more equal the female participation in the social structure, the more equal the female participation in crime. More specifically, the research question is - Does more sexual equality reduce the gap between male and female criminality? This question is addressed using a cross-sectional analysis of female crime in one state.

Methodology

The units of analysis include all 100 counties in North Carolina. Independent variables include degree of occupational sex segregation (OSS), income equality (IE) and female labor force participation (FLF).

The first two are indicators of the sexual equality of a county. OSS is a measure of the equal participation of females in occupations (i.e., equal employment) IE is an index of economic equalty -- the smaller the difference between male and female incomes then the greater the equality. Female labor force participation is an important variable since it is a general indicator of the degree of female participation in the work force (but not necessarily equal participation). There is some evidence that greater female participation in crime is a consequence of greater female participation in crime (Simon, 1976). This greater involvement in crime may result in a greater similarity in crime rates between males and females.

Control variables consist of population density (i.e., population per square mile), degree of urbanization, percent unemployed, percent nonwhite, percent of the population female, and female age structure (i.e., percent of the female population 15-25 years old). All these variables were compiled from the 1970 census (U.S. Bureau of the Census). The index of occupational sex segregation (OSS) was computed using census data and the formula for this index is discussed below.

Data for the dependent variable, male-female involvement in crime, were obtained from the North Carolina Police Information Network (PIN). Male and female arrest rates for 21 crimes were made available by the PIN Director upon request.[2] These rates were used to compute the index of crime differentiation by sex (ICD). Before continuing, a word or two is necessary concerning the dissimilarity indexes.

The index of occupational sex segregation (Duncan and Duncan, 1955; Gross, 1968) is used to measure the degree of sexual equality across occupations and to measure the criminal differentiation between male and females. It measures essentially what proportion of females would have to move into male occupations in order to be "equal" (or to achieve full integration into male occupations). The formula for occupational sex segregation is:

OSS = Sum of Absolute Differences/2

The index is obtained by summing the absolute differences between the percentage of females and the percentage of males in each occupational category and dividing the sum by two. The result provides a measure of the degree of occupational sex segregation and can be interpreted as the percentage of females who would have to change occupational categories in order for both sexes to be distributed equally across all categories.

This index can also be used to calculate the degree of criminal differentiation (Gibbs and Short, 1974). Instead of using occupational categories, types of crime are used in the formula. The absolute differences between the percentage of female arrests and the percentage of male arrests are added and the resulting sum is divided by two. The result is an estimate of the percentage of females who would have to commit "male" crimes in order to have equal sexual participation in crime.

The data were analyzed using multiple regression analysis procedures which allow the researcher to assess the simultaneous impact of each independent variable on the dependent variable. The three independent variables

(OSS, FLF, IE) were entered into regression equaltion followed by the "control" variables.

Results

The data in Table 1 summarize the socio-demographic characteristics of the 100 counties in North Carolina. The average size county is 51,180 in population with an average density of 112 ppsm and percent urban of 24.7.[3] The index of dissimilarity indicates that about one-half (49%) of the females in North Carolina would have to change occupations in order to be on par with males. Females in North Carolina counties earn on the average 62 percent of the male income. About 42 percent of the women participate in the labor force and 51 percent of the population is female. The measure of crime differentiation indicates that, on the average, 37 percent of the females in North Carolina would have to commit other crimes in order to be equal to males in participation. The average male crime rate is 5,927 per 100,000 males and the average female crime rate is 1,322 per 100,000 females.

Table 1 about here

This study examines the differences in female crime across populations (i.e., counties) and not individuals. A comparison is made across populations in terms of the degree of sexual equality in the work force with the degree of equal female participation in crime. Given the literature reviewed earlier, the similarity in crime between males and females would be greater in those counties in which the occupational sex segregation

is low and income equality, and female labor force participation are high.

The zero-order correlations in Table 2 show that the three independent variables are moderately related to the index of differentiation in crime (IDC). Occupational equality has a moderate positive association with IDC (.26), female labor force participation (FLF) a moderate negative correlation (-.30) and income equality a moderate positive association (.20). The results suggest that the differences in male and female crime are less in counties characterized by a high degree of occupational equality, a high level of female labor force participation, and a low level of income equality.

Table 2 about here

The results of the multiple regression analysis are presented in Table 3. The data show that the OSS does have a small impact on criminal differentiation (B=.26) but this impact diminishes as other variables are added to the analysis (B=.09). The factor which consistently has the strongest impact is female labor force participation (FLF). The inclusion of the other variables--density, urbanization, unemployment, family income, percent nonwhite, percent female, and age structure--does not add much to the predictive power of the model (16% v. 17%). Urbanization and family income are the only control variables that seem to have any impact on reducing the gap between male and female crime.

Table 3 about here

Urbanization has a positive impact on male-female crime differentiation (Beta = .28) and family income level a negative impact (Beta = -.25). That is, the lower the urbanization of a county and the higher the income level of a county, the less the sexual differences in crime rates.

Three major variables emerge as important factors - female labor force participation, urbanization, and income level. The sexual equality variables of occupational sex segregation and income equality are of lesser importance. In general, the results suggest an interesting pattern. The counties with the lowest male-female crime differentiation are the less urban more affluent counties with a high female labor force participation. More female participation in the work force, but not necessarily equal participation, contributes to a reduction in the crime gap. Apparently greater sexual equality does not result in female and male crime rates becoming more equal. Factors unrelated to sexual equality are more important in "equalizing" sexual involvement in crime.

One interpretation is that greater equality among the sexes does not result in a significant increase in female crime. The data in Table 4 provide some evidence regarding this explanation. A multiple regression analysis was also conducted in which the total female crime rate was regressed on the same independent variables. The findings show which variables have the greatest impact on the rate of female crime. Operating together all the variables explain 44 percent of the variance in female crime. The most important predictors are FLF (B = .45), population density (B = .35),

percent female (B = .28), percent black (B = .26) and percent unemployed (B = .25). Counties characterized by a high female labor participation, high population density, high percent female, high percent black, and high unemployment tend to have a higher rate of female crime.

In both tables FLF is the most important factor. The more females participate in the labor force the more likely they will commit crimes similar to males. However, more equal participation and greater income equality do not have an important impact on female crime. As women become more equal in the work force there is not a tendency for them to become more criminal.

Discussion

In this study an attempt was made to measure the impact of sexual equality and female labor participation on the similarity of male-female involvement in crime. The results indicate that the greater sexual equality, whether in occupations or income, does not significantly reduce the male-female gap in criminal behavior. However, female labor force participation is consistently an important factor. Generally, the less urban, more affluent, high FLF counties have fewer differences between male and female crime rates.

A caveat is necessary before these results can be interpreted. North Carolina is a very rural state made up primarily of "many, closely-spaced, small communites" (Moxley and Wimberley, 1979:2). Accordingly,

the state is probably more traditional than the United States as a whole. The degree of sexual equality in the North Carolina counties may be less than in other states. Hence, the impact of sexual equality may be lessened.

There are some other points which need to be emphasized in the interpretation of these results. For instance, occupational equality, as measured by OSS, may not free women from their traditional domestic roles (Steffensmeier, 1980). Although more women are working they still have their duties as a "housewife." Women are not becoming more "emboldened" and more like men. As a result, women's crimes continue to be traditionally female in character. Furthermore, in the work world traditional sex roles persist.[4] Also, Steffensmeier (1980:58) points out that "there is no evidence that they are making inroads into the male buddy network. The latter, in part because of hours spent after work by males in drinking, gambling, and carousing, can be an important contingency for many crime-related activites." Another point raised by Steffensmeier is that not all occupations are similar in terms of criminal liability. There has not been a significant increase in female participation in "occupations such as truck driver, warehouse worker, deliveryman, dock worker, welder" and so on which provide opportunities for illegal activities (such as drug dealing, theft, etc.).

The movement of women into male occupations does not necessarily result in less segregation. There seems to be a phenomena best described as "male flight" resulting from females entering male occupations. Gross (1968:207) found that "when women invade a male occupation they take it

over, with the result that there is as much segregation as before, perhaps because the men leave or take better jobs." On the other hand, when men move into female occupations the women tend to stay. However, men usually move into administrative or supervisory positions. A system of sex stratification and segregation persists. Thus a reduction in OSS may not mean a real reduction in occupational sex segregation.

These concerns aside there is still reason to conclude that sexual equality does not contribute to greater female criminality. Reduction in inequality has been found to be a factor in the reduction in crime (Danzinger and Wheeler, 1975). Further, the upwardly mobile tend to be more conventional (Terry, 1978). Correspondingly, an increased income may decrease temptation by satisfying the persons material needs (Radzinowicz, 1937, Steffensmeier, 1980). Rather than increase female crime, greater sexual equality may lead to a decrease or stabilization of female crime. If sexual equality does not account for the differences in male-female crime then what does?

Female labor participation is consistently an important factor. It is a primary contributor to a reduction in the gender crime gap and an increase in crime. Two factors may explain this pattern. They are opportunity and economic pressure. As Gibbs and Short (1974) noted, the incidence of a crime is laregly a function of the opportunities available for that crime. According to this view, as long as women occupy primarily traditional female roles, e.g., housewife, their criminality will reflect the nature of this role. Most of their offenses will be located in the

home or in the context of their homemaking role. Thus, more participate in the labor force, the opportunities for criminality increase. In addition to shoplifting and fraud, embezzlement and other forms of theft become available.

As indicated earlier, however, participation in the work force alone does not ensure equal participation. Barriers to participation in illegitimate roles continue (Steffensmier, 1980). Women may be committing more crimes but they are primarily the same old (female) crimes. The movement of more women into the labor force may increase opportunities for crime but not significantly. The criminal liability of some occupations is greater than others and until women enter them in significant numbers current criminal patterns will probably persist.

A more plausible explanation is economic pressure. Skogan (1979) argues that more women than even before carry the burden of supporting themselves and often their families. Increasing numbers of women are divorced, single parents, heads of households, and employed in low-paying unskilled jobs which intensifies the economic pressures (Rans, 1978). A recent study by Bartel (1979) found that greater participation in the labor force by single women was strongly related to property crimes among females. Steffensmeier (1980:1102) suggests that one factor contributing to the female crime increase is the "worsening position of many females in the United States". In this study, unemployment was found to have a moderate association with both the level of female crime and the male-female crime differentation. An extensive study by Brenner (1976) showed a significant direct relationship between unemployment

and crime in the United States.

The strong relationship between FLF and female crime may be a function of unemployment (or underemployment) of women. For instance, a study by Phillips et al. (1972) showed that labor force participation is a better predictor of crime than unemployment rates because "the latter underestimate the actual number of people out of work." (Balkan, et. al., 1980).

To conclude, the evidence presented in this study suggests that greater sexual equality is not going to significantly reduce the gap between female crime. Women do not commit more crimes (especially "male" crimes) as they become more equal occupationally and economically. Instead, there is reason to believe that sexual equality may operate to reduce female crime rather than to increase it. Sexual equality ought to lead to less crime rather than more crime. Accordingly, economic pressures are proposed as the primary contributing force to the female crime growth. Women commit more crimes because they face economic pressures similar to men not because they are equal to men. This issue needs to be addressed more frequently in future research on female crime.

Footnotes

[1]Of course, total sexual equality does not exist in reality. Women may "want" to occupy more male roles but as the evidence indicates females are precluded from entering these on a large scale in both the legitimate and illegitimate worlds. Females still occupy lower echelon female oriented positions in the work force and still play female-supportive roles in the illegitimate work force (Steffensmeier, 1979b).

[2]Arrest rates for males and females are used to estimate the crime rates for both sexes. Arrest rates are the best official statistics available which differentiate the offender in terms of sex. The twenty-one crimes included are murder, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, auto theft, simple assault, arson, forgery, fraud, embezzlement, possession of stolen property, vandalism, possession of concealed weapon, drug law violation, gambling, liquor law violations, disorderly conduct, and vagrancy.

These rates may reflect law enforcement practices to some extent. For example, more watchman style and traditional police practices might be expected in more rural counties. However, a control for urbanization is included which should provide some estimate of differences in law enforcement practices between rural and urban counties.

[3]North Carolina, by several measures (e.g., percent urban), is the most rural state in the United States. (Hathaway, 1960; Moxley and Wimberley, 1979). Other measures, however, suggest that North Carolina is not so rural. Its population of 5.5 million places it eleventh nationally and its population density places North Carolina seventeenth nationally. Its percent nonwhite is

is the sixth highest nationally. Moxley and Wimberley (1979) point out that North Carolina's high population density is not a consequency of concentrations in a few large metropolitan areas (e.g., as New York). Instead, North Carolina is "a state of many, closely-spaced, small communities" (p.2.). Thus, North Carolina is primarily a densely-populated state made up largely of small communities.

[4]A male and female may occupy the same occupational role yet differences in both degree and kind may exist. For example, a female may be listed as a salesperson and her area involves "feminine items" such as curtains, kitchen items and so on while a male may be listed as a salesperson yet his duties involve "masculine things" such as sporting goods, auto parts, and so on. There is a horizontal differentation as well. For example, the title of college teacher involes several ranks in which women tend to occupy the lower echelons. Although there is not sexual differentation per se, there is differentation in terms of rank.

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TABLE 1

Means and Standard Deviations of
Selected Variables for N.C. Counties, 1970

	$\bar{X}$	S.D.
Size	51180	58267
Density	112	115.1
Urban	24.7	23.1
Occupational Sex Segregation	.494	.05
Income Equality	.617	.099
FLF	42.8	7.1
Family Income	6803	1304
&Unemployed	4.05	1.5
%Black	22.2	17.0
%Female	51.1	1.7
Female Age Structure	40.8	3.6
Crime Differentiation	.37	.11

TABLE 2

Zero-Order Correlations

	OSS 1	FLF 2	Inc. Equality 3	Density 4	Urban 5	Unemp. 6	Income 7	%Black 8	%Female 9	Age 10	Female Crime Rate 11	Index of Crime Differentiation 12
x_1	1.00											
x_2	-.45*	1.00										
x_3	-.14	.19	1.00									
x_4	-.35	.48	-.17	1.00								
x_5	-.18*	.62	.18	.41*	1.00							
x_6	.32*	-.60*	-.16	-.30*	-.51	1.00						
x_7	-.56*	.78	-.16	.71	.62*	-.57*	1.00					
x_8	.43*	-.20	-.27	-.10	-.08	.20	-.31*	1.00				
x_9	-.04	.20	.08	.07	.10	-.19	.07	.06	1.00			
x_{10}	-.41*	.34*	.03	.46*	.26	-.17	.49*	-.28	-.43*	1.00		
x_{11}	-.16	.40*	-.21	.51*	.19	-.05	.39*	.21	.27	.18	1.00	
x_{12}	.26	-.30*	.20	-.25*	-.05	.05	-.34*	.07	-.07	-.23	.83*	1.00

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TABLE 3

Regression of Independent Variables on Criminal Differentiation Index

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. OSS	.26	.16	.18	.18	.13	.14	.09	.09	.09	.09
2. FLF		-.23	-.27	-.27	-.42	-.47	-.39	-.38	-.37	-.37*
3. Income Equality			.27	.27	.23	.23	.17	.16	.16	.16
4. Density				.00	-.07	-.06	.00	.00	.00	.00
5. Urban Index					.26	.23	.27	.28	.28	.28*
6. Unemployed						-.13	-.16	-.16	-.17	-.17
7. Family Income							-.21	-.23	-.25	-.25*
8. % Black								-.02	-.02	-.02
9. % Female									-.05	-.05
10. Female Age Structure										-.17
R	.26	.33	.43	.43	.47	.48	.49	.49	.49	.50
R^2	.06	.09	.16	.15	.18	.18	.18	.17	.17	.17

TABLE 4

Regression of Independent Variables on Female Crime Rate

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1.	Dissimilarity	-.16	.03	.01	.08	.11	.08	-.01	-.04	-.04	.02
2.	FLF		.41	.46	.30	.40	.50	.54	.52	.45	.45
3.	Income Equality			-.29	-.19	-.17	-.16	-.26	-.12	-.12	-.14
4.	Density				.36	.39	.39	.48	.41	.39	.35
5.	Urban					-.17	-.11	-.04	-.11	-.11	-.10
6.	Unemployed						.25	.21	.22	.26	.25
7.	Family Income							-.35	-.07	-.00	-.05
8.	% Black								.27	.25	.26
9.	% Female									.21	.28
10.	Age Structure										.14
	R	.16	.40	.49	.57	.59	.62	.63	.67	.70	.70
	R^2	.02	.14	.22	.30	.31	.34	.35	.40	.43	.44